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T O T H E
D E P U T I E S
O F

Protestant Dissenting Congregations,

IN AND ABOUT THE CITIES OF

LONDON AND WESTMINSTER:

R On their intended
APPLICATION TO PARLIAMENT,

For the Repeal
Protestant Dissenters
OF THE
Corporation and Test Acts.

"Ye know not what ye ask,"

JESUS CHRIST.

L O N D O N:

Printed for the *Author*; and sold by *J. Buckland*,
Paternoster-Row.

1787.

L. E. T. E. R.

TO THE

REPORTERS

OF

Protestant Dissenting Congregations

IN AND ABOUT THE CITIES OF

LONDON & WESTMINSTER



APPLICABLE TO PARLIAMENT

For the Report

OF THE

Commissioners and Clergy

of the Protestant Dissenting Congregations

in and about the Cities of

LONDON & WESTMINSTER

For the Report of the Commissioners and Clergy

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Writer of this letter conceives of the Deputies to whom it is directed, not as the Representatives of the whole Body of Protestant Dissenters in England, but as a number of gentlemen deputed from the several congregations in and about London, to which they belong, (perhaps two from each) to meet, and concert proper measures on

cases brought before them, in which the civil rights of the parties who apply are either invaded or threatened. And to many such they have afforded assistance, or instruction to good purposes. For instance, complaints being made to them of Justices of the Peace refusing to register places intended for the publick worship of Protestant Dissenters; on information, and remonstrances from these Deputies, they have thought themselves obliged to register them.

Upon being informed of riots committed in such places when

lawfully registered, the aggressors have been brought to condign punishment.

When dissenting Ministers have complained to them of being maliciously appointed to parish-offices, from which they are exempted by law, these Deputies have procured them relief.

They have obliged several clergymen to read the Burial-Service over the graves of Dissenters, who had, in former instances, refused to do it, and to make their acknowledgments for such omissions of duty.

They have protected dissenters from the claims which clergymen have made for the baptizing children which their own ministers have baptized—for churching women who were never in their churches—and for burying their dead which their ministers have buried in their own burying-grounds.

Other cases of the like nature have been brought before these gentlemen, in which they appear to have acted with a degree of spirit and prudence that has done them honour.

Upon being applied to A. D. 1767, to settle a dispute, between two contending parties in a congregation of Dissenters, they wisely declined interfering; and assigned this reason in their minutes that they considered it, as the proper business of the Deputation or Committee, to defend the civil rights of the Dissenters against oppressions, and not to settle disputes and controversies in their own churches. Whether they have adhered impartially to that line of conduct ever since this writer does not wish to say. But this he thinks, they cannot deviate from it, without going out

of their province: Nor can he consider them, however confident of the equity of their claim, and sanguine in their expectations from it, sufficiently authorized either by principles of their own, or by any power with which they are intrusted by virtue of their deputation, to bring forward a business, like that now before them, in which all the Dissenters in England are concerned, without knowing the general sense of the Body, for which they undertake to act. He may have mistaken both them and their appointment; but he has the satisfaction to know, that he has

not designedly misrepresented
either.

P. S. Since the above was written, a Letter has been circulated from the Chairman of the Committee, consisting of twenty-one of the Deputies. To the list of which are annexed, the names of many other respectable Gentlemen; called in to give countenance and support to the undertaking; which they will certainly be able to do, as several of them are Members of Parliament. Whether the Committee was thus enlarged by the general voice of the Deputation, or merely

by themselves, does not appear:
Bnt it is rather singular that they
should be called an enlargement of
the Cummittee of the Deputies from
our dissenting Congregations, as it
is well known many of them have
no connection with any such con-
gregations, but are members of the
church of England.

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L E T T E R, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

Y OUR Wise and spirited exertions in support of the civil rights of the Dissenters bespeak the most grateful acknowledgements of the Body at large, as well as of many individual persons and societies, relieved by you from the illegal impositions of their misguided opponents.

And though I am so unhappy as to differ from you in opinion of the propriety of your present measures, I wish to preserve and

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express, upon this and every occasion, the respect due to your persons and characters; and shall ever retain a grateful remembrance of your many services in the great cause of christian liberty.

Your candour will, I trust, give me credit when I assure you that the few lines I now take the liberty of directing to you, by no means proceed from an affectation of singularity, or a disposition to take the lead on the side of opposition to my brethren.

I am conscious of undertaking the subject under many disadvantages; and have therefore wished to be prevented by an abler hand.

As I have not yet seen or heard of any thing upon the subject, I have felt my self (shall I say?) compell'd to make the attempt; though it be to offer sentiments inconsistent with those of Gentlemen of whose judgment,

in many things, I have the highest opinion. And I am the rather encouraged in such an undertaking as I am persuaded you will not, cannot, be offended with any one for thinking differently from yourselves; as many of you are frequently declaring your predilection in favour of liberality and free thinking, equally on the subjects of human policy and a divine revelation. I shall therefore take the liberty of addressing you without reserve: And if I conceal my name for a while, it is not that I may say any thing that I should be afraid or ashamed openly to avow, but merely that it may not prejudice any reader either for or against the principles advanced, or the arguments by which they are supported. If they appear to you without force, they must leave you without conviction; but if, on the other hand, they approve themselves to your impartial judgment, as honest, good men, you will act upon them.

But before we enter more directly on the merits of the question, permit me to appeal to your candid and sober reflections, Have you not been rather hasty in your first resolutions and proceedings? You have undertaken to represent a large body, and to act for them in an affair of no inconsiderable magnitude.

Report says, you have not only resolved to take up this matter, but have actually applied to his Majesty's Minister, and to other Members of the House of Commons, in the name and behalf of the whole Body of Protestant Dissenters: And that without so much as knowing, or taking any steps to know, the sense of one in a thousand of that Body. Is this a fact? surely, Gentlemen, if it is, you have not acted in this business with your usual delicacy.

If you desire admission into corporations, &c. without the Test, you have undoubt-

edly a right to apply. But you wish not to confine the privilege to yourselves, so far is kind: Yet should you not have first known whether your brethren desire it, or would account it a privilege? Strenuous as you are in asserting the right of private judgment, you would not perhaps be well pleased if any other body of Dissenters though ten times your number should dictate to you, even in matters of less moment. I do not take upon me to say what is the general opinion of the Dissenters on the expediency of your present application to Parliament. This I can say, that I am not alone in wishing it had been omitted. But why not take their sense before you had applied in their names?

You have not forgot the cause between the City of London and the Dissenters in the name of Allen Evans, Esq. and the decision of the House of Lords upon it the

11th of February, 1767. The Dissenters then availed themselves of that as their privilege, viz. their inelegibility to civil offices, which you now complain of as an hardship. Perhaps some now are of the sentiments of their Fathers, and think themselves happy in not being liable to be called out to these shewy, laborious and expensive offices.

I would not insinuate that you were determined to judge for your Brethren; and to pursue a favourite object with or without their approbation. Yet, perhaps, some may infer the principle from the practice. But you know, Gentlemen, that we all like to judge and to act for ourselves. Had your petition only respected the Protestant Dissenters in and about London and Westminster, would the Deputies of their several congregations have paid an humiliating respect to the Members of their several Societies, had they taken the sense of the whole; or of persons deputed by them at a meeting held for the

discussion of the subject? But, considering this as a measure in which all the Dissenters in England are more or less concerned, will not many be surprized that it should have been undertaken by a number of Gentlemen, though truly respectable, certainly very small, when considered as acting for the whole Body? My principles, founded on reason and observation, convince me of the evil of monopolies of all kinds; and therefore, singular as this species of them may appear to be, you will excuse me if I bear my protest against it. Let us act together where our common interests are depending. I am one of those old fashioned Christians who think that, what of this nature we cannot do with general concurrence, we ought not to do at all.

Had that appeared, I should have hoped that some good might have arisen from it, which I cannot at present discover, and the evils prevented which I now forebode. And

that, on the principle of the old adage, which, though liable to perversion, would apply here, viz. vox populi, vox dei. But, dismissing this thought,

I am at a loss to discover the seasonableness or expediency of your application. You wish a door to be opened for admitting Dissenters as such into corporations, &c. are we wanted in those stations? when I say, wanted, I mean, are there not Gentlemen of circumstances, abilities, and character, who make no scruple of qualifying as the Law directs? We shall hereafter touch upon the imposition of the Test, on the one hand, and submission to it on the other—at present our only enquiry is, whether we have such apprehensions of the Magistracy, &c. at this period, and think it so much more dangerously corrupt, than in the days of our fathers, as that it becomes the immediate duty of Dissenters, from the regard they owe to the safety and prosperity of the

state, to assert their right of sharing in the power and privilege of making and executing the laws of our country. I have the pleasure to know many Dissenters, who, I have no doubt, would do honour, and prove blessings, to Britain, not only on a Bench of Justices, but in the Senate and in the Cabinet. And it is as notorious, on the other hand, that some legally qualified for such stations would be a discredit to them. But if the former were permitted, probably many would decline, to fill them, from whose abilities, rank, and religious character the greatest advantages might be expected: and, as to others, it is of little moment to their country whether they be Dissenters or Church-men.

I cannot think better of a bad man, (a libertine or a sceptic for instance) because he calls himself a Dissenter from the Church of

England: nor do I ever wish to see any man, be his religious profession whatever it may, in a publick office of importance to his country, who is, in private life, a vile character. I say not this from an apprehension that corporations, &c. would be corrupted by the admission of Dissenters,—I do not believe it: I rather fear corporations would injure them—But of that hereafter. All I shall say further here is, that I hope they may do without us. Whether Dissenters, in some instances, might not be valuable accessions to them, is another question.

I feel myself upon tender ground, and therefore wish to tread cautiously, comparisons are odious. I am free to declare, my opinion is, we have good and bad of both sorts. Gentlemen of the Church of England will not, I hope, be offended if I wish them better—nor my dissenting Brethren if

I remind them there is yet room to mend. There is publick virtue among us, and I am pleased to observe it; but that pleasure would be very sensibly increased if I could say, with equal truth, that, we have among us, the purity and piety of our forefathers. This would render us more happy in private life, and more fit for public stations.

Taking it for granted that the sheet lately dispersed among us intituled "The Case of the Protestant Dissenters with reference to the Corporation and Test Acts" was printed under your direction, I shall beg leave to consider its contents as expressive of your sentiments upon the subject. You there complain of it as an hardship, and "a mark of infamy" on Protestant Dissenters, to be excluded public offices, I freely acknowledge with you, that, the Act in 1661, which excluded them, marked

strongly the intolerant spirit of the times in which it was passed ; that it was in itself partial and unjust, and irrational in its requirements. But Lord Mansfield accounts for it, in the truly noble and patriotic speech you refer to ; “ In those times” (says his Lordship) “ the Dissenters were “ reputed and treated as persons ill affected, and dangerous to the government.” But in these times of more liberality and light, as their principles are better understood, their persons are consequently treated with greater respect, nor can I consider their exclusion from civil offices, by such an act in such times, a dishonour to them, but to the Parliament that passed it. Men may be injured by oppression, but it is no disgrace to them. How far we are injured by this will be matter of future discussion—Give me leave to say, in the mean while, I cannot suppose that you, Gentlemen, are considered as infamous for

refusing to submit to a religious Test, in order to qualify for a civil office.

No Member of the established Church can despise you for maintaining consistent characters; at least none but those whose obloquy would do you honour. And as to your dissenting brethren, they must revere all who thus act uprightly and uniformly, upon their avowed principles. We have not less veneration for the memory of our forefathers, because they suffered the loss of their property, their liberty and their lives, in the cause of truth and purity. We leave rulers, who are appointed not to be a terror to good works, but to the evil, to answer to the Supreme Proprietor and Sovereign of Mankind, for all such perversion and abuse of the power with which they are intrusted. Protestant Dissenters have undoubtedly a natural right to the honours and privileges of that civil community, of which they

make not only inoffensive, but useful and respectable members; especially when they cheerfully submit, in common with their fellow subjects, to its necessary burdens. But are we to infer from thence that it is, in all circumstances, expedient, or even wise, to assert that right? Were you, by claiming an estate of fifty pounds a year, in danger of losing another of an hundred, your good sense would immediately discover, that line of conduct which duty and interest concur to recommend. You say, how will this apply here? "If we get nothing, we shall lose nothing." True,—But my apprehension is, not that you will be losers by a disappointment, but by your success. I should be happy to find myself mistaken: At present I have my fears, and am conscious to no unfriendly disposition in suggesting them. You do not, you cannot flatter yourselves, or your brethren, with expectations of pecuniary advantageous to be derived from it. If

these acts are repealed, the Dissenters may and must serve troublesome and expensive offices; some in which Gentlemen of taste would have opportunities of exhibiting their genteel carriages, and liveries, and of spending five or six hundreds a year; but while the disposal of posts of profit is in other hands, in vain may they look for the loaves and fishes.

But you have no such interested views: permit me rather to address you, as Gentlemen concerned for the cause of real religion among the Dissenters; especially in yourselves and your own more immediate connections. And have not you heard it remarked of Gentlemen who have sought magistracies, that they have suffered greatly in that respect, by their exaltation? True there have been, and I would hope, some of you might be, exceptions. I dare say you hope it for yourselves.

But pardon the freedom if I remind you of a truth recommended by an authority, which

I know you revere, and confirmed by the experience of many generations—"the heart " is deceitful above all things". It has deceived many who have made the experiment. They have been led imperceptibly by the snares inseparable from public stations, into such improprieties as they would have shrunk back from with abhorrence when in private life; and at the most distant intimations of which they would have retorted "is thy servant a dog, that he should "do this?" The fact is too plain to be denied, and too serious to be trifled with. If they have not intirely put off their religion when they have put on their gowns, less of it has appeared, the longer they have worn them. The reasons are obvious. Their time and attention have been employed on so many objects, and they have been introduced into such connections, and engagements, either of public business, or entertainments, as have given their minds a new

taste and turn; or, at best, have left them less leisure, and, which is still worse, less inclination for more serious, and interesting employments. Allow me to speak freely—habits have hereby been contracted, by which their health has been impaired; their circumstances, and consequently their nearest and most valuable connections, injured; their private affairs deranged; their domestic happiness, and even the peace of their own minds sacrificed—to their ambition.

The Christian Societies with which they were connected, feel the want of their spirited exertions. They are in publick companies at those hours, in which their families need, and formerly enjoyed, the benefit of their religious services; and, as to the exercises of retired devotion.—But I forbear. All I wish, is, that Gentlemen

would think seriously, and think before it is too late, and then act as judgment and conscience direct. Yet keep these two important objects in sight, the interest of real religion around you, and that of (what, if you will allow me an old fashioned phrase I should call) the life of God in your own souls, and you will prefer a private, to a public station; excuse me, I am inclined to remind you, here, of a weighty adage from a respectable pen, Solomon's; "A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself, but the simple pass on, and are punished."

Some will perhaps say, would this writer persuade us, we cannot be good magistrates without being bad men? By no means. He has said before, if bad men, you cannot be good magistrates—Yet, permit him now to express a fear, that, if magistrates, you will not be better christians. And, if

you purchase honour, or power, at the expence of your religion, (wealth, it has been said already, is not to be expected; but if it was, that, and all the world can either give or promise) you will find it dear bought in the end. But “you should be serving the public”—much might be replied to that plea: at present all I shall say, is, “let others serve it, who have not your great interests to hazard.” You say, “why not serve both,” I answer few have, “very few, who have made the experiment: “I wish you may, if you do. If our views coincide, you see, that the present state of religion among us, is such, as to bespeak the constant and zealous efforts of every friend, who wishes its support and credit; and we have many reasons to apprehend that it will, and must languish, (unless supported by miracles) if deserted or neglected by persons of your influence and abilities.

Observe, I did not say, the dissenting interest, but that of real religion in it. Yet if the one decline, I despair of the prosperity of the other: nor should I make an effort, or express a wish to support that any longer than the great interests of evangelical truth and practical religion are promoted in it and by it. The honest solicitude the writer feels for their preservation and prosperity, and for your personal happiness, as connected therewith, has extorted this address from him.

Will you allow him to urge one thought farther? Probably, at the first mention, it will surprize you, viz. the unhappy influence, which the success of your application might have upon the civil constitution, and the protestant interest, in Britain. But, before you laugh, read what he offers to explain, and confirm the declaration. He must beg leave, first, to refer you to a

paragraph or two of the Case, mentioned above, in which, you do not seem to have expressed yourselves with your usual precision.

The first reason you there urge for the Repeal of these Acts, is, that " Every man, " as it is now universally acknowledged, " has an undoubted right to judge for himself in matters of Religion, nor ought " his exercise of this right, to be branded " with a mark of infamy." The fifth, is " The Oaths of Allegiance and supremacy, " and the declaration against transubstantiation, have, without the sacramental " Test, been found effectual, for more than a " century, to exclude Papists from both " houses of Parliament." I admire the prudent precaution of your next reason, viz. that " it will no way affect the " established Church." You were probably apprehensive of an outcry from a

certain quarter " If these pillars are taken away, our Church is in danger." But was I a clergyman of the Church of England, I should be far more inclined to concur with you in a petition for the Repeal of the Test Act, than I am as a Protestant Dissenter : that sends many to the sacrament of the Lords Supper there to whom, I should be very unhappy to be obliged to administer it, and above all to give it them as a qualification for a civil office : you have justly censured this, as a hardship, on serious conscientious clergymen. There, Gentlemen, I think entirely with you ; and consider it as an impious prostitution of an ordinance of Christ, as well as a cruel imposition both on clergy and laity in the church. But it is their business, not ours, to attend to that.

Let us recur to your first and fifth reasons compared. From the manner in which

you express yourselves in the former, we must think you account it a mark of infamy to be rendered inelegible to civil offices; and such an one as no man ought to be branded with for exercising his right of thinking for himself. But how came you, Gentlemen, so soon to forget yourselves, as in a sentence or two, to congratulate your country on the exclusion of the Papists from both Houses of Parliament? I am far from thinking the two cases parallel. But the truth is, your first position is vague and unguarded. Take it in its utmost extent, nay, in its most obvious meaning, and you have no right to exclude a Papist, a Mahometan or a Jew, on account of his religious principles, from any civil office in the state. It is branding him with a mark of infamy, which you say no man ought to be branded with, for thinking for himself. "He has an undoubted right so to do." If your assertion means any thing, it means too much; and holds up a sentiment which

if strictly and literally adhered to, would be immediately attended with unhappy consequences, and might, in the end (though I am persuaded that is farthest from your design,) be subversive of our happy constitution. I am mistaken if I could not mention many sentiments, both political and religious, the avowed professors of which you would not by any means wish to see in public offices of importance to this country. You tacitly acknowledge this in your third Reason, in which you assert, and with great justice and propriety, “ That “ Dissenters (I presume, you mean Protestant—Dissenters) are well affected to “ his Majesty, and the established Government, are ready to take the oaths required “ by law, and to give the fullest proofs of “ their loyalty,” Therefore they are entitled to their Country’s honour, and the confidence of his Majesty. It is very true, and I will add,

that those ignorantly mistake, or meanly misrepresent their principles, who speak of them as, in any respect, unfriendly to the British Constitution. I am not afraid to challenge their worst enemies, to produce a single tenet, by which, they are distinguished from their fellow subjects of the establishment, of that nature or tendency. Nay, I will venture to affirm, that the present Government has not firmer friends, nor his Majesty more affectionate subjects than the Protestant Dissenters.

Here therefore I cannot but think, we may, and ought to distinguish, between one subject and another, with respect to their sentiments, as they appear friendly, or inimical, to the peace, liberty, and prosperity of a nation. It is well known, that this distinction runs through the whole of

our constitution, from the lowest magistrate, to the sovereign—Nor would you wish it obliterated. You know, too well, the principles of Popery, to trust your civil and religious liberties, in the hands of Roman Catholics. And yet, what you solicit, on the principles, which you urge to obtain it, would, I fear, be attended with consequences of this nature, more serious and alarming than you may at present be aware of.

Should you obtain a repeal of the Test Act, will not Papists, and their friends, take encouragement to hope from thence, upon your grounds, that every thing else will be removed which now stands in the way of their advancement? You have repealed the Test and Corporation Acts, to open the doors for one Body of Dissenters from your establishment, why not take away the oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy,

the declaration against transubstantiation, &c. for the admission of another? Pardon me, Gentlemen, if I say, I hope the Legislature will decide accurately on the important question; and distinguish between sentiments, both political and religious, which may, and others that cannot safely be entrusted, either with the legislative or executive power in these kingdoms.

You have suggested, that your application has merely for its object, the relief of the Protestant Dissenters: And some may, probably approve of such an exclusive clause; but have you not involved yourselves by it, into an unpleasing dilemma?—Either, we must wish the privilege we seek, confined to ourselves; and then we act on principles, inconsistent with our avowed liberality of sentiment—or, we are

opening a door, a wide door, for men of all principles, christian, or antichristian, republican or arbitrary; as we say, no man should be excluded for mere matters of opinion. You remember an old saying, "of two evils, chuse the least." But is there in this case, no way of avoiding both? Permit me, to express the wish I feel, that you would adopt it, and desist. I am not singular in my opinion, that a wise retreat, will do you more honour (shall I say?) Than a ^{repulse}~~defeat~~, yes, than the most complete victory. Having drop'd that hint, it reminds me, of that much admir'd sentence, of an ancient commander, when surveying the bloody trophies, of an expensive victory, "such another victory, and I am ruined." what, the success of your measures, may cost either yourselves, or your children, and the cause, which you mean to serve, it is not for me to say. But should your pe-

tition be granted, and granted upon the very broad bottom of your favourite maxim, I should not wonder, though, perhaps you with me, may have occasion to weep, if we see it followed by another, from a body of men, who have their friends in Britain, though, of principles ^{only} not inconsistent with ours, but subversive of our happy constitution.

Some will be surprized at the insinuation ; and say, perhaps, that man should rather live in Turkey than in Britain, who can suppose an extension of our liberty is like to do us any harm. Liberty is a very favourite term ; and the liberty of christians ought most certainly to be dear to us : but while we act upon that maxim of our holy religion, which requires us to stand fast in the liberty, wherewith Christ hath made us free : let us fear, let us detest that licentiousness which too many attempt to dignify and

sanctify by that respectable name: I mean that which refuses to be guided by the doctrines, or governed by the precepts of divine revelation. And be as liberal as you may, consistent with the regard you feel for both—While men avow themselves, not bound to hold faith with those about them, whom they brand with the name of heretics—While they assert that to plunder and murder such, is not only innocent but meritorious,—while they refuse the laity, the use of the sacred scriptures, in a language they can understand, as unsafe, considering them as incompetent judges of their meaning—And, at the same time, assert the infallibility of their ecclesiastical superiors, and their sole right of judging for themselves and all around them—While their priests claim a power, of granting and selling absolution of past sins; and indulgence for future—In short, while Papists are Papists, and Popery is the same—shall we not

unite in the petition " From such a religion, and from such rulers, good Lord, " preserve us!"

Some have said, " we will claim our " right, and hazard the consequences." what! all possible, or supposable consequences? or even those of which we have suggested our apprehensions, in some preceding pages? Gentlemen must be very warmly attached to a measure that will, pursue it at such hazards; and sacrifice interests serious and important as those, at the flattering shrine of pomp and power. Be intreated calmly to revise your project, its principle and its tendency.—And then let each lay his hand upon his heart, and say, as before God Almighty, " is this " purely designed, is it apparently calculated " to serve my natural, my civil, and my " religious connections in their most important interests? what if my family, my " country, and the great cause of religion

“ and liberty among my Bretheren, by
 “ present indulgence of this nature, should
 “ be materially injured?” Give me leave
 to say many around you have their apprehensions; and many whose understanding and judgment you cannot despise; not a few to whose opinion you would have paid some deference had you thought proper to take it. The writer of these lines, without pretending, to an universal correspondence, has his reasons for thinking, that could the sense of the whole Body of Protestant Dissenters in England, be known upon the question, whether your petition should be presented to Parliament, (and that should have been known, before it had been presented at all) you would have found a respectable majority against it.

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The Legislature will judge, how far it is their wisdom and duty to grant the repeal when many, for whose relief it is intended

by deprecate, rather than desire it. I should
should humbly conceive they would expect the gene-
leave al concurrence of the Body before they pass
appro such a Bill; and have reason to believe, it would
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GENTLEMEN,

Your's, very respectfully,

A PROTESTANT DISSENTER.

London: Feb. 13, 1787.

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GENTLEMEN,

Yours very respectfully,

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London: Feb. 10. 1847.

